

## **Christianity, Social and Cultural Change for Sustainable Life Improvement of Isan Community**

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**Abstract:** Christianity's success in Northeastern Thailand or Isan communities is contributed to early Christian efforts, which gained trust and belief from rural communities whose members were in need of health care, services, protection and hope. The results of providing social services to remote communities in Northeastern Thailand or Isan have created a large following in Christian faith in encouraging people to do good deeds and help those in need. Large Christian communities were created and the Christian faith was extended to the next generations. The successful integration of beliefs, traditions, customs and rituals have created strong Christian communities where members are united and help each other maintain social order, environmental conservation and improve the quality of life. Isan Christianity is a mix of local traditions and customs combined with the Christian faith. Many Christian rituals were made easier to follow and adapted in combination with local traditions, which were harmoniously combined to create a peaceful community, a strong united society and sustainable quality of life.

**Key words:** Christianity, Isan, Northeastern Thailand, social, cultural, sustainable, community

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The current social and psychological problems that people are facing on modern times is the factor for the revival of moral ethics. Thailand is currently facing many problems in society, from family problems, deterioration of moral ethics, irresponsible sexual conduct, drugs, narcotics, pornography and bad consumption habits. These problems have led to the revisiting of moral ethics in religion, because of the belief that religion is necessary to the human society and the changes and development in society must come from people and nations having good moral ethics. Solving problems in development or sustainable development will rely on morality for success. Therefore, governments must give importance to the development of moral ethics and good behavior to citizens.

Siam (Thailand) was highly tolerant of other religions and was indeed the only country in Southeast Asia, where the Catholic fathers could establish themselves safely (Missions, 2008). Christianity first entered Thailand during the reign of king Somdet Phra Maha Dharma Racha. Shortly afterward, French missionaries followed in the 16th century, which was during the time of King Narai.

Christianity under the support of King Louis XIV had a policy to expand Christianity and French influence in Southeast Asia by using the tool of religion and treaties. Gradually, Christianity made headways into Northeast Thailand or Isan through the province of Ubon Ratchatani in 1883 and expanded to the provinces along the Mekong River in the provinces of Nakorn Phanom that Phanom, Mukdahan, Nongkai, Sakonakorn and Vientiane (modern day Laos). Christian faith expanded through the role of being a giver, which gave out to charitable causes and newly inducted Isan Christians would be protected by the treaty (Nantachak, 1991). Christian faith created social changes and in aspects of livelihood, economy, social, politics, education, public health. Local villagers that wanted freedom and equality created adopted their new faith and integrated traditional customs with Christianity and the result was a cultural combination of traditions and rituals.

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Christianity and social and cultural change for sustainable life improvement of Isan community is a qualitative and action research study, with a purpose to:

study the development status and role of Christianity in Northeast Thailand. To study, the beliefs and traditions of Christian worship in Northeast Thailand. To study, the changes of economic, social and customs of Christian communities in Northeast Thailand. To study Christianity in improving and developing a sustainable quality of life.

The research area is limited to the study of development, status and roles of belief, tradition, rituals of Christianity in Isan and the effects on Isan community's economy, social, culture. The study is also aimed at the understanding of the form of Christianity in the development of sustainable livelihood. The research area was purposively chosen, which include the village community's of Ban Pohn Soon in the province of Udonthani, the village of Ban Non Somboon in the province of Khon Kaen, the village of Ban Tah Rae in the province of Sakonnakorn, the village of Ban Boong Mai in the province of Ubonratchatani, The village of Ban Songkon in the province of Mukdahan and the village of Ban Chiang Yuen in the province of Nakorn Phanom. Research data was collected by means of analyzing surveys, interviews, observations, questionnaires and workgroup discussions. The research was conducted from July 2005 to January 2009.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **Development, status and role of Christianity in Isan**

**Development:** Christianity first came into Northeast Thailand in the year 1767 at the province of Ubon Ratchatani and after 2 years, started to expand to different provinces along the Mekong river. Christianity initially was very successful in the Northeast. There were many new followers in a short period of time and the faith expanded rapidly. Evidenced of this are the increasing numbers of village members acceptance of Christianity up to the point that Christian community's had >90% faith in Christianity.

The numbers continued to increase and new communities and needed to set up a new community. Early Christian community would be targeted at small remote towns and where there was wide belief in Spirits and Animism. Other areas that early Christian missionaries targeted include villages with cases of contagious illnesses and recent pandemics. Villagers that were filled with unemployment had no where else to go, former slaves and those that were accused of being evil demons such as ogres. Christianity would enter these villages and offer their help and services as follows:

- Health care and treatment for patients in the community from pandemics, helping them to survive and creating trust and faith in Christianity. These services were provided in the villages of Ban Pohn Soong, sub-district Pohn Soong, district of Ban Doong in the province of Udonthani and at the village of Ban Song Kon sub-district Pah Kahm, di in the district of Wan Yai, in the province of Mukdahan
- Health care and treatment for patients who had leprosy at the village of Ban Nohn Somboon, sub-district of Ban Nohn Soboon, district of Ban Haed in the province of Khon Kaen
- Voluntary relocation of the original community to a new location due to the increase of Christian villagers to the new village of Ban Boong Mai, sub-district Boong Mai, district of Warinchumrahb in the province of Ubon Ratchatani and the village of Ban Chiang Yuen, sub-district Wern Pra Baht, district Tah Utehn in the province of Nakornphanom
- Help and provide services to those that were freed from slave labor, which were mostly Vietnamese and locals that were freed from slavery, accused of being demons, ogres and evicted from their homes. These villagers were provided with shelter and were protected by the Christian parish in the villages of Ban Tah Rae, sub-district of Tah Rae, district of Tah Rae in the province of Sakon Nakon

**Status:** The status and structure of Christian communities in Isan were organized as an assembly or council that took care of members of the community. The council is responsible in assisting the Minister in management and services within the church such as: the various activities within the church, solving problems and crisis within the community, finding solutions for problems or obstacles in occupancies and incomes and residential accommodations. Solutions and ideas would be discussed together and the council will also perform their duty in fund management from donations. Expenses would be approved by the council and they promoted the creation of community organizations, groups and activities to strengthen the community. Community groups that were created included; Vincet Amor group, which visited and provided services to the poor and needy, Pohl Mary or Mary's soldiers group, which encouraged and gave moral support to Christians, who were unable to attend church. Other groups and associations were created to the exchange of knowledge and friendly relationships. Extending the Christian faith in Isan was performed by emphasizing the quality of life of Christian members in regards of supporting children, youths and people to do good deeds.

**Roles of Isan Christians:** Management will perform their duties in collecting the details community members and registration. Registered information includes details on birth, death, marriage, divorce and baptism, which under Catholic is called Samano Catholic meaning Catholic census. New born members of the village will first go the district office and then bring the documents with more details back to the Catholic census. Members of the Christian community when they relocated or change their personal status will also provide the same information to the Catholic census just the same as they do with the central government census.

The expense for operating the Catholic census comes from donations within the community and partially from donations from national and international Christian charities. Extending the Christian faith in Isan utilizes many methods and strategies. Besides from being an example for others to follow in the Christian faith, there are also rituals and beliefs that accompany the teachings of Christ. Rituals and beliefs in marriage for instance; If the couple to be married come from different religious faith other than Christianity, then they must first study and learn Christianity first. Extending the Christian faith among fellow Christians follow traditional cultural imparting of knowledge where the older generation teaches the new generation about proper conduct, belief and values. Gatherings and meetings are usually at the church on Sundays.

#### **Belief, traditions and rituals of Isan Christians**

**Belief:** Isan Christians believe in the Trinity. They believe that there is only one true God and that God is the: son, father and the holy spirit. Isan Christians believe in the 10 commandments:

- Do not worship any other gods
- Do not make idols of any kind
- Do not misuse the name of the Lord your God
- Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days a week are set apart for your daily duties and regular work, but the 7th day is a day of rest dedicated to the Lord your God
- Honor your father and mother
- Do not murder. Do not commit adultery
- Do not steal
- Do not testify falsely against your neighbor
- Do not covet your neighbor's house
- Do not covet your neighbor's wife, male or female servant, ox or donkey, or anything else your neighbor owns

**Traditions, rituals, sacrament of Isan Christians:** Isan Christians follow the catholic tradition of the seven sacraments, which are baptism, chrismation, eucharist, penance, anointing of the sick, holy orders and matrimony.

- Baptism is the first sacrament of Christian initiation, given to newborn children of Christian families in Isan. After giving birth to the child, the parents will register the birth details to the Catholic census and wait for about one month after birth when the child is health and strong enough to receive Baptism in belief that people are born into this world with accompanying sins and Baptism will wash away those sins. Baptism is for the forgiveness of sins (Wolfhart and Geoffrey, 1998), not only personal sins, but also of original sin, which it remits even in infants who have committed no actual sins
- Chrismation is the second sacrament of Christian initiation. In Isan Christian communities, it is the announcement to local community that the child that was baptized at birth has now matured or grown up. The sacrament or right is performed to strengthened and deepen the gift of God. The age of the person receiving Chrismation varies from about at least 6-7 years old or when they have reached an age that they are capable of making mature decisions.
- Eucharist is the third sacrament of Christian initiation by true Isan Christians participate in holy mass or holy communion by partaking of and in the body and blood of Jesus Christ through bread and wine
- Confession also called Penance is the sacrament of which a woman or man who has sinned is reconciled to the church, following confession to a Priest (Campbell, 1996).
- Unction or Anointment of the sick is the sacrament of healing. Where, it is intended for the care of the baptized, who are sick (with the exception of public penitents). The oil is blessed by the bishop and may be brought to the sick by a Priest or lay person (Lacoste, 2004). The ritual helps the patient to remember to keep his faith and not wander from the grace of God
- Holy orders is the ordainment of Christian Priesthood and seldom seen in Isan Christian communities
- Marriage or holy matrimony is the sacrament of joining a man and a woman in marriage where the ritual is performed in front of fellow Christians and the couple take vows to be faithful and love each other till death due them part. The ritual is performed by the Priest

Many local traditions, customs and celebrations have been combined with Christian faith and are celebrated in Isan Christian communities. These unique cultural blend of traditions and rituals adapted to the lifestyles of Isan communities are:

- Thai's Christians sacrament celebrations is an annual event held on October 22nd. On this day, many Isan Christians mark the event of Pope John Paul II celebration at Saint Pedro's Cathedral on October 22nd (1980). Ever since that day there have been annual festivals and celebrations of Christian sacraments in Isan
- Remembrance of the Christian sacrament is organized annually, on Sunday, mid December
- Christmas celebrations held on the 25th of December. The day is marked with joyful activities and celebrations and decorations among family, relatives and friends
- Fast on this particular event, Isan Christians will refrain from eating meat and go without food. Isan Christians currently allow only strong healthy adults to participate in the Fast, while children and the elder can eat regularly
- Holy ash day or ash Wednesday is an event that starts on a Wednesday, where Christians will receive ashes burned from palm leaves that have been recited by the Priest. On this day, Isan Christians will refrain from eating one meal and from eating meat
- Cemetery rites is when Isan Christians go to provide merit to deceased relatives and friends. Community members will gather at the cemetery and the Priest will lead them in the rituals. The date and time of the ritual depends on the community and Priest

#### **Economic, social and cultural changes in Christian communities in Isan**

**Economic:** Isan Christians still continue their main occupations in agriculture, farming and fisheries. Others have engaged in hire labor and services where they would commute from their homes. Incomes from both primary jobs and secondary incomes average between 40,000-200,000 Baht/family/year. Most of the expenses go to the general consumption within the family. Other expenses include luxury goods such as cars, motor cycles, telephone and dept from borrowing from the community funds, commercial banks and other financial groups and institutions. Most of the borrowing are used in their profession or business.

**Society:** Most Christian communities in Isan are heavily engaged in Agriculture and Farming. Education is provided by the government and private sector and also

by Christian communities. Seventy percent of Christian communities have their own private schools or called locally Catholic schools within their community. Besides the standard curriculum, Catholic schools also teach Christian faith. Christian families in Isan are usually large collective of family and relatives with many generations of family members living within the community or close to each other. New comers or new village members are usually in-laws that move into the community after marriage. The characteristics of Health care in Isan Christian communities is that when someone in the family is sick, they will first be brought to the local clinic within the community and then the closest hospital depending on the seriousness of the case. The reasons for this are because Christian communities in Isan are mostly located in rural areas far away from the big city. Some communities are located in such remote places that there aren't any clinics at all and they have to depend on hospital services of the nearest district. Christian communities in Isan also promote good health care practices by exercises, workouts, fitness groups, aerobic groups, Thai massage groups, sports and singing. The local district office also has funds allocated for parks and gardens within Christian communities. Administrative responsibilities within Christian communities in Isan are usually elected religious leaders or a council made up from prominent members within the community. Those who are willing to lead the community must first present themselves and past through votes just like regular democratic election processes.

**Cultural:** Currently very few children and youths attend church, but this has been accepted in Isan Christian communities. What remains the same include the continued belief in the Trinity, the 10 commandments. Sunday is still considered a family day where they gather at church to sing and pray. However, traditions were reduced down to simple ceremonies to fit social conditions and current economic situations. Christian traditions and local cultures were modified and combined in a harmonious mix of life styles. The cultural blend that are celebrated and followed include such as the traditions of new years celebrating, Christmas, Pasqual (Passover), Songkran festival and Pah Bah Festival, funeral ceremony, Car blessing or christening, ground-breaking ceremony for new homes and buildings, Opening ceremony for new residencies and Pitee Sao Aek (Primary post or main pillar of the new foundation).

#### **Christianity and development of sustainable life improvement**

**Economy:** The professions of Isan Christian communities are mostly related to agriculture, farming, fisheries, labor

and services. These occupancies provide the primary sources of incomes for most of the families within the community. The help and promotion of the community's council and committee have given support to villagers to create secondary incomes by engaging in other activities as a source of extra income when they are available or free from their primary work. The villagers secondary income come from sales of goods and services from the work of small groups or local enterprises in small fisheries, cattle groups, textiles group, fish products, meat products, handicraft groups. These small enterprises help the community to stay intact and to reduce the amount of migrating labor.

**Society:** The social structure of Isan Christian societies in Northeastern Thailand are very similar. Isan Christian communities have their own council, some have their own Catholic schools, belief in the Trinity and obey the 10 commandments. The community also promotes social groups and local organizations to help develop and improve the quality of life in their communities. Some groups are directly dedicated to Christian work such as the Vincent group and Mary's troops. But other groups were created to promote education, fitness and unity. These groups were created with the belief that the exchange of knowledge come hand in hand with helping others. Isan Christian communities believe that activities are tools for personal development. It will help individuals to develop their personal qualities and know how to adjust, live and work with others in peace. The church is the center of the united strength of the various groups and organizations within the community. Local groups that were created include; health groups, elderly care, youth groups and environmental groups. Activities in the conservation and rehabilitation of the natural environment, helps to maintain the public's awareness of the importance of nature within the community. Environmental groups promote the planting of new trees, plants and herbs on an annual basis and during important celebrations of the year. Environmental groups also encourage people to keep and maintain a clean community and reduce garbage and waste. The combination and unity between community members, council, committee, schools, local groups and the Church is the driving force behind the development, strength and quality of life in Isan Christian communities.

**Culture:** Christian communities in Isan are a mix of cultural values and traditions. All members of the community contribute their part in celebrations and religious Rituals throughout the year. Traditional customs in the past have been adapted and combined harmoniously with Christian faith. There have been

reductions to some of the strictness in cultures to adjust to the economic status and social changes of modern Northeast Thailand. Many Christian beliefs and Rituals were relaxed, so that it was convenient to combine with local traditions.

## CONCLUSION

Christianity first came into Northeast Thailand or Isan through missionaries who came to the province of Ubonratchatani in 2424. After 2 years, the belief spread to neighboring provinces in Isan Alongside the Mekong River. Early Christian practices include redemption, health services and providing shelter to those in need. Christianity was initially very popular and successful from the rapid increase of new Christians to the point that a dedicated community was established by the Christian group. The newly created Christian communities were managed by a Christian council or committee. Which was created to help the minister or Priest manage activities, spread Christian faith that emphasize on spiritual well being and not material wealth, belief in the Trinity; the father, son and holy spirit and believe in the 10 commandments. Elements of Isan Christianity that are unique is the cultural combination of local traditions and celebrations of traditional customs; Baptism, Chrismation, Eucharist, confession, Unction, holy orders and holy matrimony. Other Isan Christian traditions and celebrations include the christening of cars, motorcycles, funerals, new house celebrations, grand openings and inauguration. Isan Christians still continue their traditional occupancies in agriculture, fisheries and hired labor to produce income that is needed to sustain their family's livelihood. In the past, there was enough income to raise the whole family, there was very little work migration and the people lived happily and carried on their traditions and rituals with changes and adaptations to their new Christian faith to best meet local conditions and social customs. Everyone contributed their efforts in environmental conservation and rehabilitation and created Christian educational institutions to teach elementary and general education and disseminate Christian faith to youths. Christianity's success in Northeastern Thailand or Isan communities is contributed to early Christian efforts in gaining trust and belief from rural communities whose members were in need of health care, services, protection and hope. The successful integration of beliefs, traditions, customs and rituals have created strong Christian communities, where members are united and help each other maintain social order and improve the quality of life. Isan Christianity is a mix of local traditions and customs combined with the Christian faith. Many Christian rituals were made easier to follow and adapted in combination with local traditions.

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